

Extract from my Autobiography "To Remember is to live"
Monday 27th April & Wednesday 29th April 1942 – 34 Helena Road

Norwich Blitz

Considering how close Norwich was to the continent, plus the fact that we also had a considerable manufacturing and engineering industry, the city had been spared the heavy and prolonged air raids which occurred in other large cities. The few raids, which had occurred since hostilities began, were of the hit and run type causing some damage and casualties. There were many false alarms and for a long period prior to 1942 there had been no alerts whatsoever. This resulted in our anti-aircraft gun and barrage balloon defences being withdrawn and sent to protect those cities, which were being subject to heavy and sustained air attack. The population of Norwich became somewhat complacent and usually ignored any air raid alert preferring instead to stay in bed and sleep. My mother and I were no exception, in fact I did not even wake up when the sirens sounded. Father was of a more nervous disposition and he would always get up. However all this changed on the night of Monday 27th April 1942.

On this night at around midnight, the siren sounded and as usual father got up and I believe, went outside. Once again I did not hear the siren, but something woke me up and I found that my mother was up and dressed and standing by the bed. She then asked me if I wanted to get up and go down to our Anderson shelter. To this day I do not know why she asked this question (unless my father had called her outside), or why I replied that I wanted to go to the shelter. Mother then helped me to put my clothes on and we went through to the back door and outside. When we stepped outside, I remember thinking the moon is bright tonight, but then realisation crept in and I looked up and saw all these bright white lights just hanging in the sky. I had never seen anything like this before but the parachute flares were as bright as day and you could easily have read a newspaper as we walked down the garden to the shelter. At that time I did not hear any aircraft engines in fact there seemed a deathly silence over the city, the calm before the storm.

When we reached the shelter, father, mother and myself struggled through the 3-foot square door and tried to settle down in the cold damp interior. Our only light came from a small torch and I was told to lie on one of the bunks and go to sleep. This might have been possible if it had remained quiet outside, but it was not to be, within minutes we heard the ominous and distinctive drone of German aircraft engines gradually getting closer. Unfortunately most of the anti-aircraft guns had been removed from around the city but there was the occasional burst of anti-aircraft gunfire from the airfield (now Norwich Airport), which was indicative of a real air raid. Little did we realise just what a terrifying ordeal we were about to be subjected to. Within seconds of the first bomber arriving over the city, we heard and felt the first explosions of bombs dropping nearby.

This was made more terrifying because some German aircraft had a siren fitted to the rear fuselage, which emitted a high-pitched whining sound and was activated prior to commencing the bombing run. The explosions and the noise of the aircraft siren, coupled with the fear and isolation one felt cooped up in a 6 foot by 6 foot steel room, half in and half out of the ground did scare me, and I began to shake uncontrollably. What my parents were feeling at this time I do not know, but they tried to comfort me as best they could. As the raid continued some bombs were obviously landing in our neighbourhood as we continually heard debris raining down on the corrugated iron roof of the porch over the shelter door. We did not know what the debris was, but it certainly did not help me and my shaking continued throughout the air raid. After about an hour or so there was a lull in the bombing and we thought perhaps it was over, but no, once again more aircraft were overhead and it began all over again.

Because most of the anti-aircraft gun defences had been moved from the city, the German aircraft were not deflected from their mission and were able to bomb however they wished. It is difficult to put into words the continual noise that battered our eardrums during the 2 – 3 hour raid, but to put it into context, around 185 High Explosive bombs were dropped within a mile radius of us equating roughly to one explosion every minute. In addition, several hundred Incendiary bombs were also dropped which added to the general cacophony of noise. Many of these latter bombs fell in the city centre causing extensive fire damage to the large department stores, the majority of which were completely gutted. To give an idea of the ferocity of these fires, the red glow they caused in the sky, could be seen by my aunt and uncle living 40 miles away at Castle Rising. Eventually the bombing ceased, it went very quiet outside and the all clear sounded around 2am. Not knowing what to do next, we remained in the shelter and my shaking gradually subsided as I realised that the ordeal was hopefully over.

We were still wondering what to do, when we heard a noise outside and my uncle Herbert opened our shelter door. Living 4 doors further up the road at number 42, he came to see how we were and asked us to come out and go round to his shelter. This was an underground brick shelter, which he built in his back garden before the war began. Inside it was the height of luxury, with bunk beds, food storage, a chemical toilet and electric (car battery) light. We extracted ourselves from our shelter and the sight that met our eyes was totally different to that which we had last seen some three hours earlier. The sky was now dark, instead of a nice tidy garden it was now strewn with brick rubble, broken tiles and chimney pots, glass and lumps of soil. This is what we had heard falling on to the top of our shelters' corrugated iron "porch". Treading carefully over all the debris, we made our way through the passage to the street and the same scene was repeated there. Making our way up the street we went through the passageway into the garden and then down the steps into my uncle's shelter where my aunt and cousin Doreen were waiting. My cousin and I were put onto the bunks where we tried to get some sleep but shortly after arriving the sirens sounded again and we steelled ourselves for another onslaught. Fortunately nothing happened and the all clear sounded about a half an hour later and my cousin and I managed to doze off.

After a few hours sleep, we all emerged into the daylight of the new day at around 8am to see for the first time just what had happened overnight. Everywhere we looked there was utter shambles, rubble was lying all around, roofs were without tiles, windows had disappeared, doors were hanging at crazy angles and we were still in the back yard! Carefully negotiating the debris, we passed through the passageway out into the street to a scene of devastation. Walking the few yards to our house we could see that the first 5-6 houses at the bottom of the road had disappeared and the rescue services were working feverishly on the wreckage looking for survivors. Houses on the opposite side were severely damaged. Most of the front walls and roofs had disappeared and the upper floors were hanging at precarious angles with the furniture somehow balancing over an empty void.

As one of our neighbours had found the body of a small baby lying in the road and had laid it to rest in his back garden, the police would not let us go down our passageway to the back door so we had to enter our house by the front door. Before we could do this we had to negotiate our way around a section of Anderson shelter which had been blown from the back garden of a house further down the road and landing on our small front path. Considering this pathway was only 8 feet long by 3 feet wide and the section of corrugated iron was 6½ feet by 2½ feet, so accurately had it come to rest it appeared to have been laid there by hand. Our roof had lost most of the tiles leaving it open to the elements, the glass had been blown from the windows but we were lucky to some extent, because our blackout shutters, although now in tatters were fairly substantial and fitted inside so that most of the glass dropped outside. However inside the house it was complete chaos, soot had been dislodged from the chimney and rooms were covered with the black dust. Pictures and mirrors had been dislodged from the walls, plaster had fallen from the ceilings, and crockery had been broken. It must have been traumatic for my parents to see the house in this state, but the immediate task was to get me ready for school and for my father to go to work.

The day after the blitz was one of reflection and endeavouring to come to terms with what had happened overnight. Several 250kg and 500kg bombs had exploded in our near vicinity, including some in the cemetery at the bottom of our garden as well as the one which destroyed houses 50 yards away at the bottom of the road. The total weight of high explosive bombs dropped on the city amounted to some 50 tons, killing 162 people and injuring a further 600. A school friend of mine, Peter Brighton, who sat immediately in front of me in class, was one of those killed. We just accepted what had happened and got on with life, not like today where every time a tragedy occurs counselling appears to be a necessity. My grandfather was one of those injured. He was going into the surface shelter opposite his house in Raglan Street when a bomb exploded nearby (probably the 1800kg one that landed at the junction of Barn Road, Grapes Hill & Dereham Road) and he was blown over by the blast and broke his wrist.

Only vague memories of this day remain. I know that school was cancelled, but I do not remember going there to find out. It would have been difficult to get there anyway, as the bottom of our road was virtually impassable due to the debris from the demolished houses. However, some friends and I did get on our bicycles and wander around the local area looking at the damage and watching the various services working on repairs. One memory still vivid is seeing the massive crater at the bottom of Grapes Hill with smoke and steam rising from it. Because of the tremendous amount of damage this bomb caused, the rumours circulating at the time were that a parachute mine had exploded. This was not true as none were dropped that night. Two 1800kg bombs were dropped and it could have been one of those, especially in view of the size of the crater and the destruction, which had been caused in the area. Coming back up the

Dereham Road we also saw the damage at the Old Palace Road and Heigham Road junction. The Dial public house was gutted and the surface shelter on its forecourt had its 6-inch reinforced concrete roof dislodged but the brickwork was mainly intact. The Gas Company showroom opposite was also demolished, as were the houses on the other two corners. Surprisingly the old Gas Company plot of land together with the corner opposite, have never been redeveloped and to this day contain only large billboards.



Bomb Crater Junction of Barn Rd, St Benedicts, Grapes Hill, Dereham Rd

On Tuesdays, Market Gardeners from around the county would come to the Norwich Cattle Market (now the top of the Castle Mall), to sell their produce to the local greengrocers. In spite of all that had gone on during the night, the market still went ahead the morning after the blitz. As usual my uncle who owned a Market Garden at Shotesham, brought vegetables for his customers but instead of returning home after concluding his business, he came to see whether we needed any help. Presumably when he saw the state of our house, he must have told my parents that we should stay with them at Shotesham until repairs could be completed. As he still had business to complete he arranged to come and fetch us later in the day. On his return, we loaded a few pieces of furniture and personal effects plus the bicycles belonging to my father and myself, onto the lorry and then proceeded to leave the city. Little did we realise at the time that it would be another 18 months before we returned to live in the city once more. This was obviously going to be a new experience for me as my previous excursions into the country had been limited to a Sunday visit to my aunt and uncle and now a whole new vista was to open up.

Tuesday 28th April arrived and after breakfast, my cousins all went off to school, my father left for work in Norwich on his bicycle, a journey of 6-7 miles which he was to undertake many times in the weeks and months to come. With nothing else to do myself, I proceeded to take in the surroundings I now found myself in. Apart from being a Market Gardener, my uncle was also the local coal merchant and the main house was surrounded by several outhouses, which contained various items of equipment used in the operation of the two businesses. There was also a pigsty containing three or four pigs and a large fenced in paddock containing, what are now called free-range chickens and a few geese.

Although the farmhouse was large, the facilities available were very basic. There was no drinkable running water, the water from the tap in the kitchen was only suitable for washing. Drinking water had to be obtained, in buckets, from a spring situated on the common. This spring was about 18 inches below the surrounding surface. A wooden box had been built around it to protect the water and also to stop the cows grazing on the common, from getting to the water. The water at the bottom of the box was crystal clear and you would see the level reduce as water was removed. Within minutes the level would be back to normal but it never overflowed out of the box. Every day, winter and summer, my uncle would walk the 200 yards to the common to obtain our drinking water. Unfortunately, with 10 people now in the house, two buckets of water did not last very long and eventually my uncle invested in a large galvanised container on wheels, which held around 25 gallons, thereby saving time and effort.

Toilet facilities were even more basic. There was no flush lavatory as I had been used to, all that was available was a small brick building about 50 feet away from the house built over a pit. Inside was a wooden seat, or rather a double seat, a lower one for children and a higher one for adults. Not too bad in summer, apart from the smell and flies, but very drafty in winter. Someone had the job of digging out the pit every 3-4 months and disposing of the contents. Phew!! This was my introduction to country living and I was not very impressed. So, at the end of my first full day in the country, I went off to bed.

When an air raid was imminent there were no sirens in the countryside to alert people in the small villages and they would only seek shelter if they were hearing explosions close by. This occurred on the night of Wednesday 29th April and explosions could be heard so myself and all my cousins were told to get up and get under a large heavy dining table. I presume that my parents and aunt and uncle knew that Norwich had received another heavy raid although us children had no idea what was going on. However Thursday morning dawned and my cousins went off to school as usual but my father did not go to work that morning. Whether this was because it was his half-day off in the afternoon, or whether it was because of the night time incident that a decision had been made for us to collect some more furniture etc. and stay with our relations, I am not sure. However in the afternoon, mother father and myself squeezed into the cab of my uncle's lorry and off we went towards Norwich with the object of picking up some more of our possessions. I enjoyed the drive and was looking forward to seeing our house again and picking up some of my own personal things.

When we turned into our road something did not seem quite right, there was a lot of debris strewn about, and we could only proceed slowly down the road. It began to dawn on me that there was a gap in the terrace where our house should have been and the first house left standing was number 42 my uncle Herbert's. We now realised that a bomb had fallen in our back garden and destroyed all the houses. In fact, we heard later, that three 500kg bombs had fallen between our house and the houses that had been destroyed at the bottom of the road on the Monday night. Helena Road would never be the same again. All the houses from number 42 (my uncles) right down to Dereham Road had now been completely demolished and the houses on the opposite side of the road had been seriously damaged.

Our trip to pick up more belongings had now become a nonentity. We got out of the lorry and surveyed the scene of utter devastation in front of us. At the edge of the bomb crater was our Anderson shelter, still intact. What would have happened to us had we been in there is impossible to say. Perhaps we may have got away with some serious injury but with the explosion in such close proximity it is probable that we would all have been killed by the blast. Our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Hunt were in the cellar of their house and were unfortunately killed.

Moving around the crater, it was obvious that all the items that had previously formed part of our home were no longer in a condition where they could be salvaged. I remember seeing many of my comics (Hotspur and Champion) strewn around in the rubble, the pages blowing in the wind. Although we were able to recover a couple of books that had not been damaged, all our furniture, crockery, personal effects, photographs and toys had been destroyed. It must have been devastating for my parents to stand there looking at the destruction around them, knowing that all their belongings, which they had saved hard for, had now been reduced to scrap. I believe that there was a compensation scheme available to people who had lost all their possessions, but that would in no way help my parents to come to terms with the loss of home and memories. On this sad occasion we returned to my uncle's lorry knowing that our only possessions were those we had taken with us two days before. We also had to come to terms with the knowledge that we were now officially homeless and for a period of time, we would have to rely on the charity of our relations, for shelter.

Throughout the city, the two raids accounted for some 13,000 residential houses being damaged and another 1000 totally destroyed. The shops in the centre, bounded by Brigg Street, Orford Place, Red Lion Street and Theatre Street were all destroyed and 20 factories had either been destroyed or seriously damaged. One of the 1000kg bombs dropped on the Wednesday night penetrated the side wall of the Carlton cinema in All Saints Green leaving a hole about the size of a standard door. The damage was thought to have been caused by blast, so the cinema continued to operate as normal. It was not until several days later, and after hundreds of people had visited the cinema, that the bomb was discovered. Bearing in mind the size of the bomb, if it had exploded in this confined area during a performance, casualties would undoubtedly have been heavy.

Having spent a couple of days as a "country boy" and not really liking it that much, I realised on the way back to Shotesham, that I would probably be staying there for a time, so I would have to get used to a different way of life. I did not really appreciate at this time of my life, just how peaceful and tranquil life in a rural village could be. This was especially true of Shotesham, probably due to the fact that its situation did not attract through traffic, thereby allowing it to retain, even to this day, its own quiet charm. In those days there was a great community spirit, generated no doubt by the fact that the village was reasonably compact and the inhabitants socialised as they met up in the butchers shop, grocery store, post office and the Globe public house. Village Fetes and Whist Drives were always well attended

and a poster in the various shops usually advertised these events. These posters were “works of art” produced, at the request of the Head teacher of the village school, by myself and another boy, during our art classes at school. Sadly many villages have now lost this togetherness due to changing lifestyles bringing about the demise of the village shops and with it the daily socialising that used to occur.



Rupert Street



Regal Cinema – Barn Road Corner



Corner of Barn Road & St Benedicts street